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DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PINR SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT SHIA DELEGATION HOPES TO
BRING FRESH PERSPECTIVES TO WASHINGTON

REF: A. BEIRUT 456

1B. BEIRUT 358

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Independent Shia activist Lokman Slim plans to travel to the U.S. in early May with eight other independent Lebanese Shia activists who represent a broad spectrum of opinions. The delegation's goal is to explain the independent Shia viewpoint to a variety of Washington policy makers and opinion leaders. He will consider the visit a success if U.S. interlocutors appreciate the complexity of the independent Shia movement in Lebanon and help encourage Shia access to March 14 political figures. The list of delegation figures is contained in para 15. End Summary.

Hayya Bina and the Proposed Delegation

12. (C) Lokman Slim's NGO "Hayya Bina" ("Let's Go"), was founded in 2005 as a public interest group to promote civil liberties and citizen engagement in political and social issues. It seeks to unite Lebanese on the basis of citizenship values that transcend confessional identities. Hayya Bina's main goal is "to create a space for independent voices to express themselves, engage in dialogues and establish networks." Slim is working with his MEPI grant partner, the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) to formulate a Washington program, with the possibility of adding on a day or two in New York City. The exact dates are still being discussed, but the group will likely travel in early May.

Lokman Slim - Film-Maker/Activist

13. (C) Lokman Slim occupies a unique role in the independent Shia community in Lebanon. A noted filmmaker ("Massacre" - a documentary on Sabra and Shatila), his personal story is compelling. Slim, 46 years old, was raised in a beautiful villa owned by his family for generations in Harat Hreik area of Dahiyeh, the southern suburbs of Beirut. Describing his childhood neighborhood as a harmonious and culturally diverse area to Charge and Special Assistant during their April 5 visit to Dahiyeh, Slim watched Hizballah gradually take hold

of the area and drive out Christian families who had lived alongside the Slims for generations. (Note: Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun is originally from this neighborhood. End Note.) Slim told us a moving story of a Christian family who dug up the dirt from their garden so they could maintain a piece of their history and "begin to grow again" when they resettled in a Christian area north of Beirut. Today, the Slim residence is the only historic home still occupied by the original family. It is an oasis in an area where ugly apartment blocks and congested streets have taken over. He and his German-born wife Monika have converted the first floor of the home into UMAM, a documentary research center for archival preservation, and have opened an exhibition hall/screening center in a converted warehouse next door (septel).

¶4. (C) Slim said his opposition to Hizballah not only stems from the party's "cleansing" of his neighborhood, but also from the harassment that his Shia neighbors are subjected to on a regular basis. He told us of a conservative young woman, born and bred in Dahiyeh, who had been questioned and detained because she was seen taking pictures in the neighborhood for an art project. He also told us about a young Shia man -- a Hizballah supporter -- who was harassed, detained and questioned because his attire appeared to be "too Western" for neighborhood standards. Lokman says he is on a personal mission to save this area of Beirut and its residents from those who think they have the right to erase the rights of the individual. When asked if his outspoken stance placed him in personal danger, he told us that he faces social ostracism more often than threat of physical danger. However, he says, Hizballah seems unwilling to confront him publicly. They may send an official

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representative to the opening of an exhibit organized by Slim, but then they will harass the printer who dared to publish the brochures for the event.

¶5. (C) Slim is unique from other Lebanese figures as he has not displayed political party ambitions. Though part of a respected family, he is not the "son of" any legendary figures and he carries with him little ancestral baggage. He has, however, carved out a reputation as someone who can bring actors representing different points of view within the Shia community around the same table for a discussion. He seeks to be a group facilitator rather than a group leader, and he enjoys pushing interlocutors into frank areas of discussion. At a March 13 dinner hosted by the Charge for S/P and MEPI visitors (ref A), Slim kept the conversation lively. During an April 3 conversaton, Slim told us that another Shia guest, Tyre leader and former Ambassador Khalil al-Khalil, reached out to him to begin a regular dialogue.

¶6. (C) The USG has been working quietly with Slim for some time (protect). A low-key MEPI grant administered by IRI was used to organize a Beirut conference of independent Shia figures in December 2007. Slim brought together a group of Shia intellectuals, religious figures, and activists from Beirut, the Bekaa and South Lebanon for an entire day of discussion and brainstorming - something which is rare for this group. Slim is the first to admit that there is not one single alternative voice to Hizballah among the Lebanese Shia. In fact, he purposely did not seek to sign a unified statement or petition at the end of the conference. According to Slim, the gathering itself, the workshops, the networking and the informal conversations were the "deliverables" for the event. He is pleased to note that dialogue (both personal and via e-mail) among independent Shia actors has grown in the months that followed.

Shia Prefer Regular and "Respectful" Engagement
with March 14

¶7. (C) Slim is also practical in his political assessments,

even when speaking with USG officials. He noted that many Shia in Lebanon, although they are anti-Hizballah, are not necessarily pro-March 14. What many seek is an independent voice in national issues. Slim agrees with this sentiment, but also expresses a personal preference for more regular and "respectful" engagement with March 14 figures to cooperate on areas of common interest.

¶ 18. (C) Slim says he knows why he has trouble gaining access to the Hariris. He freely admits to being a socialist in his youth, and he was vehemently opposed to Rafik Hariri's demolition of historical homes in the Solidere area of Beirut after the civil war. As someone with a passion for cultural preservation, he found it difficult to accept Hariri's arguments for the need for rapid post-civil war reconstruction of the capital. Slim says he now understands and accepts Hariri's actions. Given Lebanon's volatile environment, he praised Hariri's efforts to rebuild and begin anew quickly during a brief time of peace. However, he said the Hariri family, and especially their circle of advisors, have very long memories. Thus far, his requests for a meeting with Saad have been rejected.

¶ 19. (C) Slim said he would not mind this "cold shoulder" if he believed that Saad or his advisors had a regular dialogue with a range of other truly independent Shia actors. Slim tells us, however, that this is not the case. He says from time to time, a few Hariri advisors are dispatched "with bags of cash" to gain "support on demand" from a few independent Shia figures. Slim says that this approach is seen as an insult to the majority of other independent Shia. According to Slim, the Hariri group "is also quick to withdraw support when they are in the mood to appease Hizballah. This unpredictable cycle prevents those who receive Qoreitum's financial or moral support from accumulating any real influence or legitimacy on the ground." Slim would like to see a regular dialogue not only with senior figures within Qoreitum, but also with March 14 members of parliament from around the country. He noted that the Mufti of Tyre, Syed Ali Al Amine, had been put up in a Beirut apartment over the past few weeks by the Hariri camp but had gone back to Tyre

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last week, frustrated that he had been kept isolated.

¶ 110. (C) Slim also tells us that the Shia are becoming more and more suspicious of the Saudi influence, as Saad Hariri spends more and more time there. "We wonder if his world view is becoming skewed." There is also a growing fear that March 14 will cut a secret deal with the dominant Shia political groups Hizballah and Amal to preserve current power balances at the expense of the independent Shia. Slim even wonders if this has occurred already. He asked the Charge to explore why it is that the Siniora government has not acted to shut down Hizballah's independent telecom network in the south and Beirut, despite the fact that its existence came to light months ago.

¶ 111. (C) Slim did have some positive remarks about March 14, however. He praised Walid Jumblatt's outreach to the Shia community as an important and much-appreciated gesture from March 14. He also has a good relationship with Acting FM Tariq Mitri, who calls occasionally to praise articles published by Slim. "I don't need ego-stroking phone calls, though. I need engagement." Slim views the recently-formed March 14 General Secretariat as a potential ally. He thinks this body might be able to speak for March 14th on controversial issues, such as Shia engagement, on a more "professional level," without getting bogged down in the politics of each individual March 14th figure. He admits that this is a tall order and will require figures such as March 14 SYG Fares Suaid to do the right thing now, even at the expense of their own personal future political ambitions.

(Note: Slim has coined the phrase "electoral libido" to refer to this desire for future political payoffs. End Note.)

¶12. (C) Slim also addressed another facet of Lebanese demographics quite simply. "Lebanon needs the Christians." He emphasizes that independent Shia prefer the cultural diversity that was evident in Dahiyeh and other areas of Lebanon in the past. They have no desire to turn the country into a two-bloc (Sunni-Shia) nation, even if that means that the Shia are the confession with the most power. "Lebanon should come before confessional loyalties," says Slim.

Political Empowerment for Independent Shia

¶13. (C) Slim is realistic about the possibility of achieving rapid advances for the independent Shia. He believes that it is unlikely that they will win any new seats during the Spring 2009 parliamentary elections. However, even if the independent Shia lose the contested seats, Slim says it will be important to show the strength of this movement when final vote tallies are published. He predicts that the 2013 parliamentary elections will also not result in new seats, but vote tallies could show the popularity gains made by the independent Shia. Slim says that if a steady, long-term approach is developed, the independent Shia could become an influential factor in the 2017 elections with significant gains in the parliament.

¶14. (C) Slim told us that real changes are more likely in the 2010 municipal elections. As services are often controlled and distributed on the local level, these elections are more important to the average citizen than parliamentary or presidential elections. Discontent for Hizballah would be evident, but there must be a serious effort to implement electoral law reforms to guarantee the confidentiality of voters' choice.

¶15. (C) Below is a brief list of the proposed Shia participants in this U.S. trip:

-- Duraid Yaghi: Vice President of Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party. A former candidate for parliament and an influential figure in the Baalbak region.

-- Saoud Al Mawla: Outspoken anti-Hizballah intellectual, sociology professor at the Lebanese University, private secretary to the former head of the High Shia Council.

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-- Malek Mrowa: Private businessman, member of the board for Nassib Lahoud's "Democratic Renewal Movement," originally from South Lebanon and he is the brother of Jameel Mrowa, the

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editor of the English-language "Daily Star" newspaper.

-- Mona Fayyad: Social psychology professor at the Lebanese University, activist engaged in efforts to break the Hizballah/Amal hold over Shia politics.

-- Hanin Ghaddar: Young female journalist currently writing for the pro-March 14th "NowLebanon.com" news portal.

-- Hady al Amin: Son of Tyre's Grand Mufti Sayyed Ali al Amin. Currently working on a PhD in the UK, he continues to serve as a political advisor to his father.

-- Sheikh Hussein Olayyan: Former member of Amal charged with implementing cultural activities throughout South Lebanon. Presently serves on the staff of his father-in-law, the Grand Mufti of Tyre

-- Rami al Amin: Young Shia journalist Beirut's southern suburbs, has published a number of well-received anti-Hizballah articles.

-- Lokman Slim

Comment

¶16. (C) A note on independent Shia leaders: Per ref A, Assad fails to impress on the local scene; his lofty claims of personal power among the Shia do not appear to be based in reality. While he says he speaks for many, he was unable to even name the members of his own board in a recent conversation with Charge. Finally, his request for another visit to Washington, featuring himself as the leader, contained a fairly large and expensive list of "must-have" items. (Embassy has suggested that he delay his trip, planned for late April -- a scant six weeks after his last visit to Washington. Assad apparently still plans to travel to meet UN and Lebanese diaspora figures in New York.)

¶17. (C) By comparison, Lokman Slim has consistently offered a nuanced and realistic vision for the independent Shia movement in Lebanon. Through past MEPI and IRI programs, he has acted as a facilitator who can gather useful and diverse Shia figures around the same table for dialogue. His lack of personal ambition is also refreshing.

¶18. (C) Embassy Beirut recommends that Lokman Slim and the independent Shia delegation be received by high-level interlocutors in Washington during their visit. Their points of view should be heard.

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